

Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

16 October 1984

Thailand: The Communist Party Tries to Adjust

Summary

Arrests in July of more than 20 Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) members and several alleged sympathizers underscore Bangkok's continuing concern that the party will develop in new directions as the rural insurgency fades. Military authorities are particularly worried about prospects for urban terrorism or a rapprochement between the CPT and the pro-Soviet Indochinese Communist parties, fears that we believe are exaggerated. [redacted]

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The CPT, in our view, is still reeling from successful government military operations of the past four years and the mass defections which have sapped its strength. We also think the rigidity of the party's leadership will limit willingness to compromise with critics within the party or to effect any rapprochement with Laos, Vietnam, and the Soviet Union. Moreover, in the short run we doubt that the CPT has the resources to consolidate an urban network of sympathizers and operatives capable of seriously threatening the government. [redacted]

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The CPT Resurfaces

Those arrested in the July round-up of more than 20 suspects included three alleged central committee members and one

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Southeast Asia Division, Office of East Asian Analysis, and was coordinated with China Division, the Office of Soviet Analysis, and the Office of Global Issues. Information available as of 4 October 1984 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to Chief, Southeast Asia Division, OEA, [redacted]

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alternates member, as well as three people not believed to be party members. [redacted] the Thai government believed the four central committee members had directed economic and propaganda activities in Bangkok.*

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[redacted] the party's urban propaganda efforts include the distribution of underground pamphlets and magazines and the publication of articles by CPT members in legal progressive magazines. One of those arrested, a journalist, had allegedly accepted funds from the party to publish CPT articles in a leftist magazine, which has since been closed down by police. [redacted]

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Current Strengths and Weaknesses

The arrests underscore Bangkok's concern that the CPT will find a way to recover from its decline over the past several years.

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Defections to the government account for most of the decline since 1979.* In fact, most of the 10,000 or so radicals and student activists who joined the insurgency during the mid-1970s have now defected. There are several other factors responsible for the party's current decline:

- A change in the government's counterinsurgency policy by the mid-1970s, when the Army began to combine military sweep operations with psychological warfare and economic development in rural areas. An important component of these tactics has been the provision for amnesty. This "open arms" policy was officially enshrined in a directive when General Prem Tinsulanonda became prime minister in 1980.

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- A drastic reduction of Chinese support to the CPT in 1979 as part of Beijing's effort to improve relations with Bangkok.
- Dissension within the CPT, largely as a result of its pro-Beijing orientation, and the leadership's dictatorial tactics toward dissenting points of view. [redacted]

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New Directions?

The unprecedented series of setbacks, failures, and mass defections have prompted some rethinking of the party's strategy. A trend toward increasing urban activities may have begun as early as 1980-81, when several of the most famous student radicals left the party. According to press reports, party documents from around that time directed urban activists to step up nonviolent united front activities. [redacted]

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[redacted] the CPT planned to concentrate its urban operations in recruitment, circulating propaganda against the government and the royal family, infiltrating student, labor, human rights, and political groups, and encouraging leftist students and intellectuals abroad. [redacted]

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The 1982 Fourth Party Congress--called to resolve disagreement on tactics and theory--papered over differences within the party by endorsing urban and united front activities without renouncing the primacy of armed struggle in the countryside. This approach apparently continues. In an interview with a journalist earlier this year, a member of the central committee--Phirun Chatwanitkun--emphasized united front work and said that the CPT sees a possibility of working openly with the major legal political parties--if the government lifted the stringent Anti-Communist Activities Act. At the same time, Phirun said that armed cadres were infiltrating urban areas, although current party policy did not endorse urban terrorism.

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We believe the CPT has in fact increased its urban activities since the 1982 Congress. [redacted]

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Looking for New Support Abroad

The CPT has also made a limited effort to move toward a more independent stand on international issues. It has shifted slightly away from its violently anti-Soviet and anti-Vietnam line, although it continues to oppose the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea.

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These shifts reflect the decisions made at the 1982 Congress to "reach out to foreign political parties and organizations" in order to obtain foreign financial assistance.

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Phirun, during his interview, emphasized the CPT's wish for broader international contacts, saying that the party had neither rejected China nor embraced the Soviet Union. The party, he said, wanted to establish relations with all other Communist parties and progressive movements.

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Assessing the CPT's success in developing new foreign support is difficult because of the sensational reporting in the local press.* Thai media, for example, have reported that the Irish Republican Army has agreed to provide aid, and that party members had contacted the West German Greens. We lack evidence to confirm these claims or to support police and press allegations of meaningful contacts with the Soviet Union. Thai police have revealed only finding a letter of condolence on Yuri Andropov's death among party documents confiscated during the arrests last July. CPT cadre had apparently failed to deliver the letter, which was signed by the CPT Secretary-General Thong Chaemsi.

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Some evidence, however, suggests that CPT representatives have been in touch with Vietnam and Laos since the 1982 Congress, but so far we have no proof of any real improvement in party relations:

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[redacted]

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- Unconfirmed press reports allege that high-ranking CPT representatives had met with a member of the Lao party central committee in April or May. Several accounts claim, without elaboration, that the Lao had agreed to renew cooperation. [redacted]

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The CPT's Prospects

We foresee no substantial improvement in the party's short-term fortunes:

- The CPT has not solved its basic problems of leadership and ideological orientation. Disagreements over theory and tactics continue. According to Phirun, some factions in the party believe the Fourth Party Congress did not go far enough in changing the party line.
- The ease with which the police arrested the suspects suggests overconfidence, inexperience, or laxness on the part of CPT leaders.
- The arrests netted some of the CPT's ablest urban leaders, which is likely to impair urban operations in the near future.
- The cumulative effect of many defections by well-known radicals may continue to discredit the party among Thai leftists. [redacted]

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Nevertheless, the CPT may come out of its decline a stronger and more realistic movement. [redacted] for example, the party has scaled back its rural operations in favor of concentrating on united front activities and recruitment. These activities have the potential of attracting those--particularly intellectuals and youth--disaffected with poor social conditions in urban areas and fearful that the rise of Army Commander-in-Chief Athit Kamlang-ek will lead to a more authoritarian government. [redacted]

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On the international front, however, the party's chances for new support are poor as long as the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea dominates regional politics. This factor alone appears to outweigh the potential advantages of supporting the CPT. China, while providing refuge for elderly CPT leaders and very little--if any--material aid, will not risk Bangkok's cooperation in support of the anti-Vietnamese resistance in Kampuchea by seriously attempting to boost the CPT insurgency. [redacted]

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The Soviet Union would probably also hesitate to actively support a weak insurgent movement while trying to increase its influence in Thailand and other ASEAN nations. Support from

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Vietnam and Laos is unlikely at this point, even though they would like to use the CPT against Bangkok to press for changes in Thai policy on Kampuchea and other issues. Real ideological differences remain between the CPT and the pro-Soviet Indochinese Communist parties, and Hanoi and Vientiane are already supporting a more congenial and similarly ineffective splinter movement. In addition, we believe the CPT now is neither pliant nor successful enough for their purposes. [REDACTED]

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